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Reflections on the Role of the Ethics Center at WMU

James A. Jaksa, Retired Associate Director

In the late 70s, Mike Pritchard and I developed an interest in communication ethics, and we convinced our departments to allow us to team teach a course. After team teaching the course for a few years, Mike and I developed our own text book, *Communication Ethics: Methods of Analysis*. In 1984, we joined with others in establishing a Communication Ethics Commission within the national Speech Communication Association (SCA). Simultaneously, we discovered that there was a growing interest in ethics among faculty in a wide range of disciplines. So, in the summer of 1985, a group of nearly 20 WMU faculty from across the university met for several days to discuss their teaching and research interests in ethics. This gathering resulted in establishing The Center for the Study of Ethics in Society, bringing together faculty from many disciplines who were interested in sharing ideas about teaching ethics and in working together on a variety of ethics projects that crossed traditional disciplinary lines.

As I reflect on the role of the Ethics Center at WMU, it brings back many pleasant memories. The Ethics Center Board, itself, was an interdisciplinary group from sociology, social work, business, engineering, philosophy, communication, educational leadership, women's studies, and English. Our discussions were lively as we planned programs and publications of Ethics Center presentations, considered development of grant proposals, organized workshops, and so on. So, of course, the Center has sponsored many events, and its range of activities has been vast. Thus, I have chosen to reflect, more specifically, on my own

activities and how they affected my department, the university, and my profession.

Ethics in communication has always been an important part of the discipline, so its concern was pretty much ingrained in what I was teaching and researching. But it was the stimulation of "Watergate" that created a turn of events which affected my career in meaningful ways. It was at our weekly tennis gatherings that Mike Pritchard and I would bemoan what was happening in the Nixon administration. "Could you believe what Nixon said—or Haldeman, or Ehrlichman, or Dean?" Then one week, Mike came to tennis and handed me a little book and said, "Read this. I think we might be able to team-teach a course together." The book was Sissala Bok's *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*.

We were able to team teach an upper division, interdisciplinary course in communication ethics, open to students in the Department of Communication and the Department of Philosophy, and to others across the curriculum. We used Bok's book and a set of readings. The course was lively, exciting, and certainly fulfilling for Mike and me. As noted above, we decided to write our own book, *Communication Ethics: Methods of Analysis*, featuring the Hastings Center list of goals in teaching ethics, ethical and communication principles, and a heavy dose of case studies, such as Watergate, the Challenger space-shuttle explosion, the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster, and a number of interpersonal communication cases. We continued to team-teach the course for several years. I also taught two different ethics related courses on the undergraduate and graduate levels in the Department of Communication.

Mike and I began offering communication ethics workshops and seminars, presented papers at various communication conferences, including the Speech Communication Association annual meetings. In 1984, my petition to form a Communication Ethics Commission in SCA, supported by 131 members, was approved by the Legislative

Council, thus formalizing SCA's commitment to the study of ethical communication. Although our original intention was to have "a handful of colleagues to get together for a couple of days," we modified our plans and organized the first National Communication Ethics Conference to be held at Michigan State University's Gull Lake Conference Center.

Beginning in 1990, eight biannual summer conferences were held at the Gull Lake center beginning in 1990. They were co-sponsored by WMU's Department of Communication, the Ethics Center, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Communication Ethics Commission of SCA. Over the years about 60-75 attendees participated from throughout the nation. The purpose of the conference was to promote research and teaching related to ethical issues and standards in all aspects of human communication, as well as to facilitate exchange among teachers and scholars of communication ethics.

Conference formats included a variety of plenary sessions, including competitive papers, case studies, roundtable presentations, and discussion groups within various areas of communication—interpersonal, small groups, organizational, rhetoric and public address, argumentation and persuasion, and mass media, freedom of speech, the history of communication ethics, and communication ethics teaching methodologies.

The Conference Proceedings were published by our ethics center. Mike and I also edited a book, *Responsible Communication: Ethical Issues in Business, Industry, and the Professions*, a book which evolved from conference seminars.

Each summer conference featured a Scholar in Residence. Scholars included Stephen Toulmin (Northwestern), W. Charles Redding (Purdue), Franklyn Haiman (Northwestern), Julia Wood (North Carolina), Josina Makau (Ohio State), J. Vernon Jensen (Minnesota), Richard Johannessen (Northern Illinois), and Clifford Christians (Illinois).

I retired in 1996. My successor in the Department of Communication was Sandra Borden. She continues to teach a communication ethics course in the department, is now Co-

Director of the Ethics Center, coaches the WMU Ethics Bowl team, and was co-director of the National Communication Ethics Conference (until it moved to Duquesne University due to space limitations at WMU). Recently, Sandy won a prestigious national award—the 2008 Clifford G. Christians Ethics Research Award for her book *Journalism as Practice: MacIntyre, Virtue Ethics, and the Press*.